

Beverly of Graustark

By **GEORGE BARR M'UTCHEON**,
Author of "Graustark"
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(Continued from last week.)

face in them. Her hand touched his cheek, and he kissed its palm again and again, his wet lips stinging her blood to the tips of her toes.
"Go away, please," she implored faintly. "Don't you see that you must not stay here—now?"
"A rose, my princess—one rose to kiss all through the long night," he



"I should die if any one saw you here."

whispered. She could feel his eyes burning into her heart. With trembling, hurried fingers she tore loose a rose. He could not seize it with his hands because of the position he held, and she laughed tantalizingly. Then she kissed it first and pressed it against his mouth. His lips and teeth closed over the stem, and the rose was his.
"There are thorns," she whispered ever so softly.

"They are the riches of the poor," he murmured, with difficulty, but she understood.

"Now, go," she said, drawing resolutely away. An instant later his head disappeared below the rail. Peering over the side, she saw his figure spring easily to the ground, and then came the rapid, steady tramp as he went away on his dreary patrol.

"I couldn't help it," she was whispering to herself between joy and shame.

Glancing instinctively toward the solitary lamp, she saw two men standing in its light. One of them was General Marlanx; the other she knew to be the spy that watched Baldos. Her heart sank like lead when she saw that the two were peering intently toward the balcony where she stood and where Baldos had clung but a moment before.

CHAPTER XXII.

She shrank back with a great dread in her heart. Marlanx, of all men! Why was he in the park at this hour of the night? There could be but one answer, and the very thought of it almost suffocated her. He was drawing the net with his own hands, he was spying with his own eyes. For a full minute it seemed to her that her heart would stop beating. How long had he been standing there? What had he seen or heard? Involuntarily she peered over the rail for a glimpse of Baldos. He had gone out into the darkness, mistaking the men at the lamp post either by choice or through pure good fortune. A throb of thankfulness assailed her heart. She was not thinking of her position, but of life.

Again she drew stealthily away from the rail, possessed of a ridiculous feeling that her form was as plain to the vision as if it were broad daylight. The tread of a man impelled her to glance below once more before fleeing to her room. Marlanx was coming toward the veranda. She fled swiftly, pausing at the window to lower the friendly but forgotten umbrella. From below came the sibilant hiss of a man working to attract her attention. Once more she stopped to listen. The "Hiss!" was repeated, and then her own name was called softly, but imperatively. It was beyond the power of woman to keep from laughing. It struck her as irresistibly funny that the Iron Count should be standing out there in the rain, signaling to her like a lovesick boy. Once she was inside, however, it did not seem so amusing. Still, it gave her an immense amount of satisfaction to slam the windows loudly, as if in pure defiance. Then she closed the blinds, shutting out the night completely.

Turning up the light at her dressing table, she sat down in a state of sudden collapse. For a long time she stared at her face in the mirror. She saw the red of shame and embarrassment mount to her cheeks, and then she covered her eyes with her hands.
"Oh, what a fool you've been!" she half sobbed, shrinking from the mirror as if it were an executioner.

She prepared for bed with frantic haste. Just as she was about to settle in and hide her face in the pillows

a shocking thought came to her. The next instant she was at the windows, and the slats were closed with a rattle like a volley of firearms. Then she jumped into bed. She wondered if the windows were locked. Out she sprang again like a flash, and her little bare feet scurried across the room, first to the windows and then to the door.

"Now I reckon I'm safe," she murmured a moment later, again getting into bed. "I love to go to sleep with the rain pattering outside like that. Oh, dear, I'm so sorry he has to walk all night in this rain. Poor fellow! I wonder where he is now. Goodness! It's raining cats and dogs!"

But in spite of the rain she could not go to sleep. Vague fears began to take possession of her. Something dreadful told her that Count Marlanx was on the balcony and at her window, notwithstanding the rainpour. The fear became oppressive, maddening. She felt the man's presence almost as strongly as if he were in plain view. He was there; she knew it.

The little revolver that had served her so valiantly at the inn of the Hawk and Raven lay upon a stool near the bedside every night. Consumed by the fear that the window might open slowly at any moment she reached forth and clutched the weapon. Then she shrank back in the bed, her eyes fixed upon the black space across the room. For hours she shivered and waited for the window to open, dozing away time and again, only to come back to wakefulness with a start.

The next morning she confessed to herself that her fears had been silly. Her first act after breakfasting alone in her room was to seek out Colonel Quinnox, commander of the castle guard. In her mind she was greatly troubled over the fate of the bold visitor of the night before. There was a warm, red glow in her face and a quick beat in her heart as she crossed the parade ground. Vagabond though he was he had conquered where princes had failed. Her better judgment told her that she could be nothing to this debonair knight of the road, yet her heart stubbornly resisted all the arguments that her reason put forth.

Colonel Quinnox was pleasant, but he could give Beverly no promise of leniency in regard to Baldos. Instructions had come to him from General Marlanx, and he could not set them aside at will. Her plea that he might once more be assigned to old time duties found the colonel regretfully obtuse. Baldos could not ride with her again until Marlanx withdrew the order which now obtained. Beverly swallowed her pride and resentment diplomatically, smiled her sweetest upon the distressed colonel and marched defiantly back to the castle. Down in her rebellious, insulted heart she was concocting all sorts of plans for revenge. Chief among them was the terrible overthrow of the Iron Count. Her wide scope of vengeance even contemplated the destruction of Graustark if her end could be obtained in no other way.

Full of these bitterest thoughts, she came to the castle doors before she saw who was waiting for her upon the great veranda. As she mounted the steps, a preoccupied frown upon her fair brow, General Marlanx, lean, crafty and confident, advanced to greet her. The early hour was responsible for the bright solitude which marked the place. But few signs of life were in evidence about the castle.

She stopped with a sharp exclamation of surprise. Then scorn and indignation rushed in to fill the place of astonishment. She faced the smiling old man with anger in her eyes.

"Good morning," he said, extending his hand, which she did not see. She was wondering how much he had seen and heard at midnight.

"I thought the troops were marching this morning," she said coldly. "Don't you miss too?"

"There is time enough for that, my dear. I came to have a talk with you in private," he said meaningly.

"It is sufficiently private here, Count Marlanx. What have you to say to me?"

"stark? Answer me, Miss Calhoun." Beverly drew back in horror and bewilderment.
"Into my room?" she gasped.
"Let us waste no time in subterfuge. I saw him come from your window, and I saw all that passed between you in the balcony. Love's eyes are keen. What occurred in your chamber I can only—"
"Stop! How dare you say such a thing to me?" she fiercely cried. "You miserable coward! You know he was not in my room. Take it back—take back every word of that lie!" She was white with passion, cold with terror.

"Bah! This is childish. I am not the only one who saw him, my dear. He was in your room—you were in his arms. It's useless to deny it. And to think that I have spared him from death to have it come to this! You need not look so horrified. Your secret is safe with me. I come to make terms with you. My silence in exchange for your beauty. It's worth it to you. One word from me, you are disgraced and Baldos dies. Come, my fair lady, give me your promise. It's a good bargain for both."

Beverly was trembling like a leaf. This phase of his villainy had not occurred to her. She was like a bird trying to avoid the charmed eye of the serpent.
"Oh, you—you miserable wretch!" she cried, hoarse with anger and despair. "What a cur you are! You know you are not speaking the truth. How can you say such things to me? I have never wronged you!" She was almost in tears, impotent with shame and fear.

"It has been a pretty game of love for you and the excellent Baldos. You have deceived those who love you best and trust you most. What will the princess say when she hears of last night's merry escapade? What will she say when she learns who was hostess to a common guardsman at the midnight hour? It is no wonder that you look terrified. It is for you to say whether she is to know or not. You can bind me to silence. You have lost Baldos. Take me and all that I can give you in his stead, and the world never shall know the truth. You love him, I know, and there is but one way to save him. Say the word and he goes free to the hills; decline and his life is not worth a breath of air."

"And pretending to believe this of me, you still ask me to be your wife. What kind of a man are you?" she demanded, scarcely able to speak.
"My wife?" he said harshly. "Oh, no. You are not the wife of Baldos," he added significantly.

"Heavens!" gasped Beverly, crushed by the brutality of it all. "I would sooner die. Would to heaven my father were here. He would shoot you as he would a dog! Oh, how I loathe you! Don't you try to stop me! I shall go to the princess myself. She shall know what manner of beast you are."

She was racing up the steps, flaming with anger and shame.
"Remember, I can prove what I have said. Beware what you do. I love you so much that I now ask you to become my wife. Think well over it. Your honor and his life! It rests with you," he cried eagerly, following her to the door.

"You disgusting old fool!" she hissed, turning upon him as she pulled the big brass knocker on the door.
"I must have my answer tonight or you know what will happen," he snarled, but he felt in his heart that he had lost through his eagerness.

She flew to Yette's boudoir, consumed by rage and mortification. Between sobs and feminine maledictions she poured the whole story, in all its ugliness, into the ears of the princess.

"Now, Yette, you have to stand by me in this," announced the narrator conclusively, her eyes beaming hopefully through her tears.
"I cannot prevent General Marlanx from preferring serious charges against Baldos, dear. I know he was not in your room last night. You did not have to tell me that, because I saw you both at the balcony rail." Beverly's face took on such a radiant look of rejoicing that Yette was amply paid for the surprising and gratifying acknowledgment of a second period of coquetry.

"You may depend upon me to protect you from Marlanx. He can make it very unpleasant for Baldos, but he shall pay dearly for this insult to you. He has gone too far."

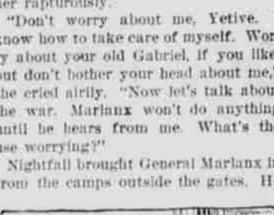
"I don't think he has any proof against Baldos," said Beverly, thinking only of the guardsman.
"But it is so easy to manufacture evidence, my dear. The Iron Count has set his heart upon having you, and he is not the man to be turned aside easily."

"He seems to think he can get wives as easily as he gets rid of them. I observe. I was going back to Washington soon, Yette, but I'll stay on now and see this thing to the end. He can't scare a Calhoun, no matter how big a graph for my brother-in-law's name you have and punch his head to pieces."

"Now, now, don't be so silly and mighty dear. Let us see how animal you can be," said the princess gently, when upon the low lounge girl from Duke's suspended hostility and became a very desirable young woman. Before long she was confessing timidly, then boldly, that she loved Baldos better than anything in all the world.

"You must not do anything foolish, Beverly," she cautioned. "Your parents would never forgive me if I allowed you to marry or even to fall in love with any Tom, Dick or Harry over here. Baldos may be the gallant, honest gentleman we believe him to be, but he also may be the worst of adventurers. One can never tell, dear. I wish now that I had not humored you in your plan to bring him to the castle. I'm afraid I have done wrong. You have seen too much of him, and—oh, well, you will be sensible, won't you, dear?" There was real concern in the face of the princess. Beverly kissed her rapturously.

"Don't worry about me, Yette. I know how to take care of myself. Worry about your old Gabriel, if you like, but don't bother your head about me," she cried airily. "Now let's talk about the war. Marlanx won't do anything until he hears from me. What's the use worrying?"
Nightfall brought General Marlanx in from the camps outside the gates. He



CHAPTER XXIII.

Baldos started off at once for the castle, his heart stinging in the darkness of the night. He missed the message which had come to him from "her highness." The envelope had been closed with the official seal of Yette, princess of Graustark, and was sacred to the eyes of any one and the man to whom it was directed. The words it contained were burned deep in his brain:

You are ordered to report for duty in the castle. Come at once. Her highness has sent an official command to Colonel Quinnox. Count Marlanx has been here. You are not expected to desert until you have seen me. There is an underground passage somewhere.

Baldos went alone and swiftly. The note to Colonel Quinnox had been imperative. He was to serve as an inner guard until further orders. Some one, it was reported, had tried to enter Miss Calhoun's room from the outside during the rainstorm of the previous night, and a special guard was to be stationed near the door. All of this was unknown to Baldos, but he did not ask for any explanations.

He was halfway to the castle when the sharp report of a gun startled him. A bullet whizzed close to his ear! Baldos broke into a crouching run, but did not change his course. He knew that the shot was intended for him and that its mission was to prevent him from reaching the castle. The attendants at the castle door admitted him, panting and excited, and he was taken immediately to the enchanted boudoir of the princess, which but few men were fortunate enough to enter. There were three women in the room.

"I am here to report, your highness," said he, bowing low before the real princess, with a smile upon his flushed face.
"You are prompt," said the princess. "What have you to report, sir?"
"That an attempt has just been made to kill a member of the castle guard," he coolly answered.

"Impossible!"
"I am quite certain of it, your highness. The bullet almost clipped my ear."
"Good heavens!" gasped the listeners. Then they eagerly pled him with more agitated questions than he could answer.

"And did you not pursue the wretch?" cried the princess.
"No, your highness. I was commanded to report to you at once. Only the success of the assassin could have made me—well, hesitate," said he solemnly. "A soldier has but to obey."
"Do you think there was a deliberate attempt to kill you?" asked the Countess Dagmar. Beverly Calhoun only smiled with consternation.

"I cannot say, madame. Possibly it was an accidental discharge. One should not make accusations unsupported. If you have no immediate need of my services, your highness, I will ask you to grant me leave of absence for half an hour. I have a peculiar longing to investigate." There was a determined gleam in his eyes.
"No, no!" cried Beverly. "Don't you dare to go out there again. You are to stay right here in the castle, sir. We have something else for you to do. It was that awful old Marlanx who shot at you. He—"

"I left General Marlanx in Colonel Quinnox's quarters, Miss Calhoun," interposed Baldos grimly. "He could not have fired the shot. For two or three nights, your highness, I have been followed and dogged with humiliating persistence by two men wearing the uniforms of castle guards. They do not sleep at the barracks. May I ask what I have done to be submitted to such treatment?" There was a trace of poorly concealed indignation in his voice.

"I assure you that this is news to me," said Yette in amusement. "I am being watched as if I were a common thief," he went on boldly. "These men are not your agents; they are not the agents of Graustark. May I be permitted to say that they are spies set upon me by a man who has an object in disgracing me? Who that man is I leave to your royal conjecture."
"Marlanx?"
"Yes, your highness. He bears me a deadly grudge and yet he fears me. I know full well that he and his agents have built a strong case against me. They are almost ready to close in upon me, and they will have false evidence

in his hand. But a swift messenger from the castle reached the guardroom ahead of him. Colonel Quinnox was reading an official note from the princess when Marlanx strode angrily into the room.
"Bring this fellow Baldos to me, Colonel Quinnox," he said, without greeting.
"I expect to say that I have but this instant received a message from her highness commanding me to send him to the castle," said Quinnox, with a smile.
"The devil!"

"Have you not seen Baldos?"
"I have not," said Quinnox, with a smile.
"I am here to order the man's arrest. It is more important than—"
"Never mind, my dear, he comes to the castle first. This note says I am to do as I please. I am here to order you to bring him to the castle."
"I am here to go, sir," he said, passing the Iron Count with a most disconcerting smile on his face.

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